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SUBJECT: FEDERAL BY-ELECTION - PROMINENT LIBERALS PREPARE FOR MOVE
TO OTTAWA

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1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In the two Ontario by-elections slated for March 17, the federal Liberals appear poised to send two well-known personalities to join the ranks of the Liberal caucus in Ottawa. In suburban Toronto Willowdale, former Liberal leadership candidate Martha Hall Findlay looks to be a lock to maintain the long-time Liberal stronghold. In Toronto Centre, former NDP Ontario Premier Bob Rae--now a Liberal and also a loser to Stephane Dion in the 2006 leadership race--is likely to claim a seat for what some say are his thinly disguised ambitions to run the federal Liberals. A Rae victory in Toronto Centre--a riding with significant NDP and Green followings--will give an articulate and well known critic of Canada's presence in Afghanistan a parliamentary base. Harper's Conservatives, sensing that the Toronto races are largely a lost cause, have run a low-key campaign, folding the by-election into their larger program of attacks on Ontario Liberal Premier Dalton McGuinty and federal Liberal leader Dion. END SUMMARY.

All Quiet in Willowdale

2. (SBU) Overshadowed by maneuvering in Ottawa over a potential spring election, intense media coverage of the U.S. presidential primary season, and to a lesser extent Bob Rae in Toronto Centre, Martha Hall Findlay has run a quiet campaign focused on maintaining the "Liberal tradition" in Willowdale, home riding of former federal Liberal minister Jim Peterson. Conservative candidate Maureen Harquail, cousin of current federal Finance Minister Jim Flaherty, is unlikely to make significant inroads. Both the NDP and Greens are almost certain to be nonfactors on March 17. Issues have been largely local, focusing mostly on improving federal support for transit in the Greater Toronto Area, health-care access, and recognition of foreign educational qualifications. A prominent Tory here lamented to us the "lost opportunity" in this riding, saying he thought the Conservatives might have had a chance, if they had picked a stronger candidate and run a stronger campaign.

Harper, Dion and Layton Proxies Fight In Toronto

3. (SBU) In Toronto Central, the presence of Bob Rae, widely believed to hold leadership ambitions within the federal Liberal Party, has focused the race on big-picture federal issues, such as Afghanistan, crime, and what is perceived as a general failure by the Liberals to effectively oppose the Conservative Harper government. The riding has been held by the Liberals since 1993, but both the NDP and Greens believe a strong showing is possible in this left-leaning riding.

4. (SBU) Rae, who still fights memories of his chaotic NDP Premiership here in the early 1990s, has pointed to his record in building social and low-income housing while Premier as evidence of his ties to the riding and that his Premiership was not "a total

disaster." In a March 11 debate, Rae paid cursory attention to local issues, and quickly pivoted to a larger critique of the Harper government. In campaign literature and public appearances, Rae paints Harper (he rarely mentions the Conservative candidate in the riding, Don Meredith) as an acolyte of George Bush and the Republican Party. Surprisingly thin-skinned in a campaign where he has a significant advantage, Rae brandished Conservative and NDP literature with unflattering pictures of Stephane Dion, accusing his opponents of "dirty tricks," and berating his Green Party opponent for suggesting that Canadian Forces (CF) are in Iraq under the auspices of the NATO Training Mission and/or DOD/CF exchanges.

15. (SBU) Rae faces pressure on the left from the NDP and Greens. At the March 11 debate, NDP candidate El-Farouk Khaki earned cheers for describing Canada's Afghanistan presence as "war-mongering," and for railing against the Security and Prosperity Partnership. Green Candidate Chris Tindal, who was relatively successful in the riding in the 2006 federal elections, continued to pitch his candidacy as an "historic" chance to elect the first Green to the Commons.

16. (SBU) Don Meredith, a Toronto preacher, businessman, and civic-activist, is widely acknowledged as the Conservatives' "sacrificial lamb" in the riding. An already difficult situation was made more so as he joined the campaign late, after the federal Conservatives ditched their previous candidate for alleged disloyalty to Harper. His debate appearances have been-charitably put-"unsteady and inarticulate." Seemingly unsure of his brief, each of his attempts to defend the Harper record of balanced budgets and his warning that people could see "blood in the streets" of Toronto if a soft-on-crime Liberal government were elected, were met with loud boos and cries of "fascist" from the debate audience.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: The lack of publicly available riding-specific opinion polling and the lack of media coverage in the mainstream Toronto outlets normally would make definitive predictions on the

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by-elections difficult. All of our contacts, including high-level Conservatives, however, agree that the Liberals will win both ridings handily. The NDP and Greens may surprise in Toronto Centre as voters, believing by-elections will not affect the near-term balance of power in the House of Commons, may choose to indulge their leftist leanings. With Rae's strong message on Afghanistan, position as Foreign Affairs Critic, and relatively distinguished background, he will undoubtedly have an impact on the Liberal caucus in Ottawa once he joins Parliament. END COMMENT.

NAY